



Kris Harris is the Sports Turf Manager for the Georgia Tech Yellow Jackets

WHAT'S A TEXAS AGGIE DOING WITH UGA TURF ON HIS GA TECH FIELD?

Georgia Tech Sport Turf Manager Kris Harris isn't bothered too much about what other people think. "I don't mind being the village idiot for a few months out of the year. All I care about is managing my football and baseball fields for those three or four months when it counts," Harris says. According to most agronomists, nothing Kris does should work.

"For football I go as low as I can go," he says. "We start out in May at 1/2"-7/16" and I go down from there. I keep my baseball field a little higher. We mow it at 3/4" most of the year and take it on down to 1/2" after the season."

Most sports field managers rarely mow their bermudagrass lower than an inch, and never lower than a half-inch. Kris also overseeds very heavily. "I may have 50 to 70 pounds/1000 of rye out by the end of the sea-

son on the football field here at Bobby Dodd Stadium. And usually about 30lbs/1000 on my baseball field. They have to be perfect all season long, not all year long."

The administration and Georgia Tech coaches want the field to be perfect for the spring practice game, too. "So far I've been real lucky there," says Harris. "I've never had to paint the football field green for a game yet. To keep my fields looking good I know I have

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to hold that rye until we're done with our big spring practice game in mid-April and the baseball season is over, which is usually the middle of June."

With that much rye Kris knows he's shading out his TifSport, holding it back. So when he sprays out his rye, he's got maybe 2% TifSport coverage. Maybe. "The hardest thing I have to deal with is impatience. A lot of guys can't do this because their coaches go ballistic. Mine do, too. Every year, for a month or two. That's OK with me. I just smile. I know everybody wants it to look good all the time. But you've got to choose your poison. Do you want it to look good year-round? Or do you want it to look great during the season? I'm a very seasonal guy."

Kris is a Texas Aggie. That explains a lot about his approach to life, which is a lot like his approach to grass: hard work and long hours followed by more hard work and longer

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Harris explains his management program to University of Georgia plant breeder and TifSport developer Dr. Wayne Hanna.

hours. Even as a student at Texas A&M he was putting in five days a week for the athletic department. "I worked for Leo Goertz, one of the best guys you'll ever want to meet," he says. It was Goertz who convinced Kris that he needed to look for an internship elsewhere to broaden his experience. "I'd been looking all over the country for something for the summer, and got a call back from Ed Mangun, who was in charge of Turner Field in Atlanta. I loved baseball and hate cold weather, so Atlanta was a no-brainer." Kris was more than eager to get started. "I finished a regional baseball tournament at A&M, drove all night, got to Atlanta about noon, worked the rest of the day and did the game that night."

"Ed is the best in the business, and Bob McCulloch, Ed's assistant at the time, is probably the best clay man you'll ever meet. I



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HE GOT HIS STAFF DOING THINGS HIS WAY, AND HIS PROGRAM JUST KIND OF TOOK OFF FROM THERE. NOW HE'S GOT ONE OF THE BEST PROGRAMS IN THE COUNTRY.

guess that's where I learned about never trusting anything to chance, from Ed and Bob. Back then the Braves were owned by Turner Broadcasting and we were on TV almost every night, so everything always had to be perfect." When Kris got ready to return to school that September to finish his final semester, Ed asked him if he wanted to come back to work as an assistant when he graduated. For the record, Kris graduated in December and started with the Braves two weeks later.

Harris recalls, "I really didn't have a life except for Turner Field and turf. When I wasn't busy at the ballpark I started hanging out here at Tech. One thing led to another and

before too long, Shawn Teske called and asked me if I would be interested in taking on the sports turf manager's job here. I initially turned him down. I was working on the professional level and thought that was where I needed to be."

Back to campus

Teske persisted, and finally, in 2000, Kris came to Tech. "When I look back on it now, I don't know how I kept the job. I was totally out of my league. I had too much on my plate because I was trying way too hard to make things perfect like at Turner Field. I couldn't even get everything to mediocre! My grass

was fair at best that first year. I had a lot of problems. George O'Leary kept my job for me. He literally did."

Fortunately Harris got through that first year and got things on his schedule. He got his staff doing things his way, and his program just kind of took off from there. Now he's got one of the best programs in the country.

When Kris first arrived at Tech, all of the fields were Tifway 419. His decision to switch to TifSport turned out to be more luck than planning. "I'd heard that there was a good new bermuda out, but I didn't know anybody that had it yet. I also knew that my Tifway was working OK for me. So when we decided to

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re-work the baseball field, it was pretty much a given that it would be 419 again. Even my sod farm, Turfgrass America down in Camilla, was pushing me to go with Tifway. I also knew this was a big deal, because when you put grass down, your bosses want it to look green. They've just spent a lot of money and they want to see green grass."

True to form, Kris wasn't taking any chances. He'd been making the three-hour drive down to Camilla every week for at least six weeks to check on his grass. "It was really looking good – that is, until my final visit to the farm. It was a snafu that worked out for the best. My Tifway had been scalped to all get-out and I knew that if I took it back to Atlanta and put it down on my baseball field, they'd probably fire me right there on the spot," Harris says. "So the farm manager took me over to look at their new TifSport field. It was young but I thought, 'If we can hold this stuff

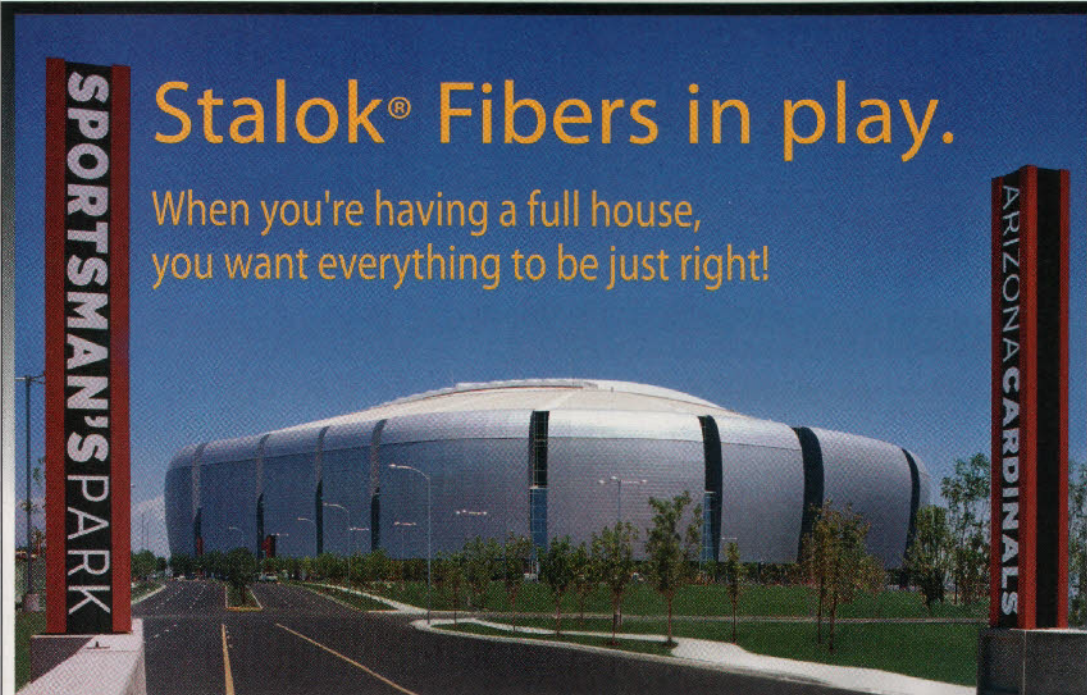
together, it just might work.' I knew I didn't want a grass that had been grown in clay, even if it was 419, and the TifSport was growing in the right kind of sandy soil. We cut it that night and started laying it down the next morning. It's amazing.

"I've got a picture I took two or three weeks after we put that TifSport down. It's of Mark Heinlein. He's with the Motz Group, and he's holding a six-foot piece of sod. I bet the roots are 12-inches deep. So I was excited. Whether it was the grass, or what I was doing, or a combination of both, something was working," Harris says.

That next summer, though, after the rye had all died back, Kris didn't like what he saw. "It was the first week of July and I thought for sure that I was going to have to re-sod my infield and hips again, but I decided to put it off until I got back from a rare two-week vacation."

Two weeks later he found that nearly the entire infield and hips were grown back in. "I was floored," he says now. "I'd never seen any turfgrass make that big of a turnaround in such a short time. So when my bosses decided that we were going to re-do the football field at the stadium that summer, I knew what I was going to do. I told Turfgrass America to cut my sod out of that same TifSport field.


"TifSport is a slow starter," Harris continues. "It needs a lot of heat before it will get going, especially in Atlanta. If your soil temperature's not where it needs to be, you've just got to play with it. When I start cutting it, I'm low, low, low. And I go down from there. When you keep it low, it's got no place else to go. It can't grow up. All it can do is grow out. We start mowing daily around here the first of May, and there's not much grass to cut then. We're basically just running the mowers over it. It's the same for all of my fields, my practice



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I KNOW I WENT OUT ON A LIMB WHEN I DECIDED TO TAKE IT LOW. BUT I FOUND OUT THE LOWER IT GETS THE TIGHTER IT GETS. AND THE MORE IT GROWS Laterally, the faster my divots fill in.

fields, my football field, my baseball field. But once I start, I do everything I can to get my bermuda up and growing. I'm aerifying at least every two weeks, and every ten days when the temperature gets above 80 degrees.

"I also pound it as heavy as I can with fertilizer for 12 to 15 weeks. I noticed that this grass will respond to different fertilizers at different temperatures, so I started playing with that," he says. "I kind of go by daytime-night-time temperatures. Between 85 and 90 degrees, it responds great to ammonium sulfate. It just takes off. We catch our grass clippings every time we mow, and I noticed we were filling up three or four buckets with clippings every

couple of days the week we'd fertilize with ammonium sulfate. Then we'd go with ammonium nitrate the next week and our clippings would start to level off. And the next week, back with the ammonium sulfate and it would be blown away. But guess what? Once you start to get those 90-degree days, it's just the opposite. Ammonium nitrate makes it rock and roll, and it doesn't really have much response to ammonium sulfate. Once I figured all of that out and the fact that TifSport likes to be low, which I think is probably the most important thing, I haven't had any major problems since.

"You can't manage TifSport like your old 419," Harris says. "I can only tell you what

works for me here at Georgia Tech. I know I went out on a limb when I decided to take it low. But I found out the lower it gets the tighter it gets. And the more it grows laterally, the faster my divots fill in."

Keeping it low

It's early September, a week away from his home opener, and Kris's height of cut is usually up to 1/2-inch by now. But not this year. "I decided that this year I'm going to try to keep it at or below 3/8 of an inch all season long," Kris tells me. He knows there could be drawbacks with this strategy. "At 3/8 of an inch you can't hide a thing. If you've got



Harris sprays his field in early September.

a little divot out there, it's there for everybody to see, because there's no taller grass around to hide it.

"I know I can always go back up to 1/2 inch if I have to. But I'm going to try to keep it at 3/8. This past week during practice it really held up well. We only had 3 divots. There might have been a few other places where it was sheared a little bit where somebody slid. But bottom line, I've still got all of my leaf tissue out there. So it greened right back up.

"Everything I'm doing goes directly against what I learned in college. Even my equipment dealers are scratching their heads. My new 3225C is a fairway unit, but it actually has 5-inch greens mower reels."

Kris will tell you that one of the smartest things he's done for his career is to figure out a way to stay in contact with the Georgia Tech coaches. "There are no two ways about it. If you're not in direct contact with the coach, you're putting somebody else between you and him. And more than likely that person can't explain to the coach what you just explained to them. Or answer questions. Because they just don't know. As a groundskeeper you're the only one who can really explain what's going on. So I made it a point to get to know George O'Leary. If he wanted to chew me out, I got to defend myself with him face to face, not through somebody else. I also really respect Chan Gailey. He is by far the best coach a turf manager ever had. He's like another father to me. He and my boss, Shawn Teske, leave me alone most of the time. They give me all the rope I need, and they trust me not to hang myself."

Kris makes it work. "Maybe I'm just in the right spot. I don't seem to have any serious problems. I don't have the disease pressures that some people have. My water is good. My soil is almost perfect now, five and a half. Maybe I'm in the perfect spot for this grass," he says.

"You have to be crazy to be in this business. If you aren't talking to your grass like an idiot you're in the wrong business."

Sam Williams provided this article. He can be reached at sgw@alltel.net. ■

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